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THE WASHINGTON POST

12 July 1978

Carter: Intelligence Leaks Harming Security

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President Carter complained to a congressional delegation yesterday that leaks of classified information are hampering intelligence-gathering efforts and damaging national security.

Neither the lawmakers who attended the morning meeting nor White House press secretary Jody Powell would later cite specific leaks that had triggered Carter's expression of concern.

"I don't know of any specific story," Powell said. "You're talking about an accumulation of events that we have been attempting to deal with and that we felt should be brought to the attention of the members of Congress."

Pressed for details and told Carter's complaint lacked credibility without examples, Powell became irritated.

"I really don't give a damn whether you believe it or not," he said.

White House officials arranged the meeting, which was attended by a bipartisan group of congressional leaders and members of the Senate and House committees that deal with foreign relations and intelligence.

The White House had announced the meeting in advance, virtually guaranteeing that any presidential comments would be made public by those who attended.

But the precise reasons for Carter's summoning the congressional delegation yesterday remained unclear. Congress is now considering legislation that would provide charters for U.S. intelligence agencies, impose restrictions on covert operations, and mandate a wide range of reports on intelligence activities to congressional committees.

The administration is particularly upset with the reporting requirements, arguing that they would swamp the intelligence agencies in bureaucratic minutiae.

Senate Minority Leader Howard H. Baker, Jr. (R-Tenn.) said Carter did cite some examples of leaks he considers damaging to the national interest. Baker declined to disclose the example cited, but said the leaks have resulted in a "new reluctance of reliable sources" to provide intelligence.

Powell made the same point during his regular briefing for reporters but, like Baker, did not specify.

"If previously reliable sources are no longer available to you, that has an impact" on American interests, Powell said. He said it is his "understanding" that on occasion intelligence sources, citing fears of leaks to the press, have refused to cooperate with U.S. intelligence agencies.

"If they are not sure you can protect them, they are not willing to talk to you," Powell said.

Neither Powell nor the congressional group said the White House expected to stop all leaks, which Baker described as "epidemic" in Washington. But they said Carter, in expressing his concern, is striving to "minimize" the number of leaks of sensitive information.

Powell said the president has raised the subject of leaks with executive branch officials and felt "he ought to call it to the attention of members of Congress."